

A Multispecies Matter—Big Walleyes Included

by Dennis Foster*

THE ENTIRE LATE-ICE SCENE IS EXCITING. Lakes that were seemingly void of fish activity are suddenly revitalized and full of biters. Spring-like weather allows anglers to shed bulky winter clothes. Most can, while on fish relating to key shallow spots, located just a short walk on the ice. Not only is fishing easy, it's often a multispecies big-fish affair that's void of anglers.



Late-ice is a great time to catch all types of fish in the same location—accidentally on purpose, as it were. Whether you're after bluegills, perch, bass, pike, or walleyes, fish are biologically programmed to seek the warmest water now. That equates to somewhere shallow.

Shorelines with suitable habitat, particularly near the north end of any lake, tend to warm the quickest and attract the initial waves of fish. Locations near the feeder creeks can load up with fish, too. About as good as it gets, though, are dark-bottomed back bays that contain weeds and have nearby access to deeper water.

It's a guess as to when fish are going to make their move to these classic late-ice spots. Some years, conditions are just right and fish bite the first time you drill a hole over a likely spot. Other times due to seasonal conditions, key areas may remain empty of fish until the last week or two of the season. Periodically check these areas, starting at least a month before unsafe ice conditions ensue.

BEEFY TACTICS RULE

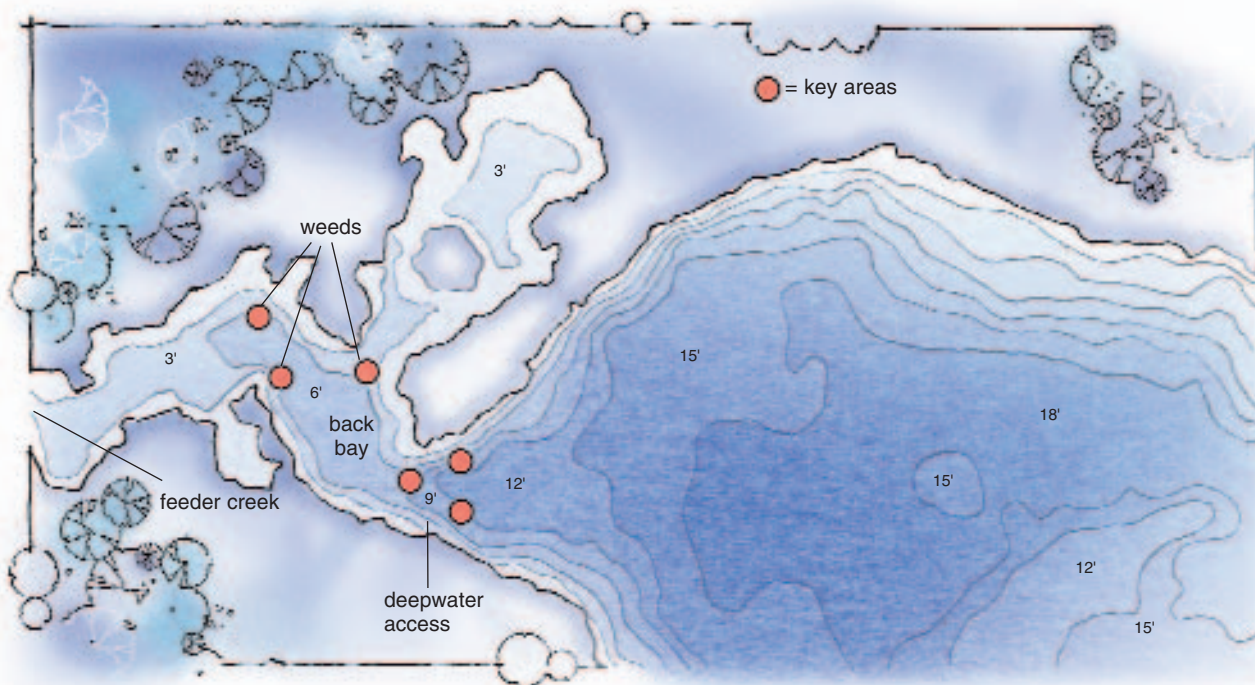
Late-season walleyes aren't looking to snack or nibble. Oversized meals are on the menu for fish building their energy reserves for the upcoming spawning rituals. There's no need to finesse aggressive fish. Baits designed to create lots of flash, vibration, and sound almost always attract fish that are looking to eat hearty.

Large-profile jigging lures produce at late-ice. Swimming lures like the Salmo Chubby Darter are good, as are vibrating bladebaits like a Reef Runner Cicada or a Heddon Sonar. Our top-producing spoon last season was JB Lure's Holie Angel, which has a vent that creates a tremendous amount of water disturbance on the upstroke. Tipped with a whole minnow, the spoon has a wide arc that falls with a wounded baitfish appearance.

TENACIOUS TIP-UP JIGGING TACTICS

A well-executed late-ice assault includes many well-placed tip-ups and lots of extra holes. In order to cover depths from shallow to deep, the more anglers you can rally for a day of fishing the better. Set as many tip-ups as you legally can in all likely spots, ranging from the first outside break to right up to shore (in a foot or two of water on some lakes).

Tip-ups produce fish, but they also serve as indicators of fish location. Fish that have moved into key shallow spots



Dark-bottomed back bays (especially bays with weeds and nearby access to deeper water) are key late-ice spots. Northern shorelines, along with feeder creeks flowing with warmer water, can also load up with fish. Walleyes also tend to gather near spawning areas.

tend to cruise in groups. When a flag goes flying, we catch the tip-up fish then start jiggging the active area. Predrill two or three extra holes to allow multiple anglers to follow the flags and start jiggging without making too much commotion.

Spool with a 30- to 50-pound-test braid and attach it directly to a snap swivel. Add a 4- to 6-foot leader of 10- or 12-pound mono and a snelled premium hook. I like a #1 or #2 Gamakatsu Walleye Wide Bend hook. Place a #4 split shot 12 to 18 inches above the bait, depending on the size and friskiness of your chub. If pike are in the area, replace the mono leader with a fine wire quick-strike rig and bait with a large chub. Walleyes and bass don't mind the extra hardware.

Bait up big. Minnows work for catching any panfish in the area. Even big 'gills attack a 3-inch minnow this time of year. Perch and crappies, too. For larger walleyes and pike: suckers, creek chubs, and redbails are great if you can find a supply. Shiners are excellent, especially 6- to 8-inches. Lightly reverse-hook

your minnow or chub through the skin and just through the meat for maximum action and hooking.

When a tip-up goes, don't make the classic mad dash to start yanking. Most times, fish grab a chub from the side, kill it, and run a short distance before stopping to reposition the bait to take it head-first. The whole process can take several minutes. As the fish starts to move off, likely at a steady or quick pace, it's finally time to set. Simply grab and hold, pulling back firmly like a cowboy reining in his horse.

As days lengthen and snowdrifts fade, ice anglers naturally grow tired of the cold and ice fishing. Tough midseason fishing, bitter winds, and winter's low-light funk often trigger the anticipation for spring. But anglers who stay the course for just a few more short weeks can experience phenomenal action, maybe the best all winter, with the chance at a big fish, including walleyes ■

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Always go with a buddy and carry the standard rope and safety picks. Wear a lifejacket or an inflatable flotation device like those made by Mustang or SOSPENDERS.